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ABSTRACT

Family theorists have considered the idea of boundary in terms of the concepts of disengagement and enmeshment. Disengaged families are those having rigid, well-delineated boundaries that are often impermeable. Alternately, enmeshed families have diffuse ego boundaries, acting as if all are part of each other, and are likely to produce an apparently strong conformist moral orientation in their offspring. Loevinger and other theorists consider a conformist morality less developed than a conscientious morality. A necessary condition of attaining the advanced stage of conscientious morality is a certain measure of freedom from pressures to think like the rest of the family. But, if emotional bonding to the family is to be retained as the individual develops moral autonomy, then some differentiation of intelligence and emotion by the individual is also necessary. A differentiated person might be able to manage an enmeshed family system that would block the development of an undifferentiated person. While variable degrees of differentiation appear to be transmitted societally and multigenerationally, it appears to be the case that the more differentiated parents are, the greater the likelihood of a healthy family in which members may differentiate and establish autonomous personhood. (Concluding material briefly offers five ideas combining concepts in the preceding discussion that are thought to be easily translated into research hypotheses.) (RH)

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Enmeshment, Differentiation, and Moral Development

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Structural family theory rests on belief that "the whole and the parts can be properly explained only in terms of the relations that exist between the parts" (Lane, 1970). Individual personality development, including moral development, is seen as necessarily interdependent with the family which is a major component of the larger social structure in which the individual functions. Piaget (1970), upon whose thought rests one of our foremost understandings of moral development--the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, held essentially the same opinions; both societal structures and those within the individual develop from the same human capacities, and are intertwined with each other.

The Boundary Concept

The major concept from structural family theory on which this paper focuses is that of boundary. According to Minuchin (1974, p. 53), "The boundaries of a subsystem are the rules defining who participates, and how." One way in which family theorists have considered the idea of boundary is in terms of the concepts of enmeshment and disengagement. Enmeshed families have diffuse ego boundaries, acting as if all are part of each other. Minuchin (1974, p. 55) explains a problem associated with this: "The lack of subsystem differentiation discourages autonomous exploration and mastery of problems." Disengaged families have members who act as if they have little to do with each other, with rigid and well-delineated boundaries that are often impermeable. An obvious problem with highly disengaged families is the difficulty in establishing any sense of "we." To function well, a family must have boundaries that are defined, flexible, and cohesive.

Loevinger and Ego Development

The work of Piaget and Kohlberg on moral development is generally well-known. Another theorist, Jane Loevinger (1976), has developed an understanding of personal maturation with four major facets which go through change and unfoldment in the course of individual growth. Two of these facets--impulse control and interpersonal style--have implications for moral development. As do other stage theories, Loevinger's theory defines stages that occur in sequence; no stages may be skipped.

The movement along the impulse control continuum is similar to that

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described by Kohlberg: from being governed by fear of punishment and hope of reward, through conformist obedience mentality, to recognizing contingencies and priorities, to self-evaluated and internalized standards, and finally to where impulse control has ceased to be a problem, and the moral issues are reconciliation of conflicts, balancing competing duties, and the like. The movement along the interpersonal style continuum goes through treatment of others in the following manners successively: symbiotic, exploitive, manipulative, suferficially nice, helpful, and responsible; the concerns then become those of respecting and fostering individuality.

Two Loevinger stages are especially interesting in relation to moral development and structural family understandings: the conformist and the conscientious. Conformists identify with authority and obey the rules simply because they are the rules. They have simplistic formulas for what should and should not be--which admit no exceptions. Ingroup solidarity is very important, and others are judged by the standards accepted by the group. Inner conflict is denied, and ingroup hostility frowned upon. Loevinger importantly notes that reaching this stage is an accomplishment that not everyone in our society achieves. To become a conformist, one must be able to identify personal welfare with that of a group. For this, people need a sufficiently truthworthy environment or community for support and security.

At the later conscientious stage, internalized morality brings increased self-consciousness and is defined more by motives and consequences than by rules. One feels real guilt--not mere shame and fear of ingroup rejection--over failure to keep self-chosen and personally-defined ideals. An intensive responsibility develops in interpersonal relationships. Sometimes conscientious individuals try to impose their ideals on another--not for the sake of conformity, but because they see true value in them. (At the next stage, this "keeper" attitude toward others diminishes somewhat.) Loevinger considers the conscientious stage to define the beginning of true conscience.

Becoming Conformist

An enmeshed family is likely to produce an apparently strong conformist morality. If relationships retain a large symbiotic component, and the punishment (disapproval, exclusion) that might befall a dissenting family member strikes at the roots of identity itself, moral decisions will only reflect an apparent chosen obedience that is, however, really a desperate "holding onto" a position in the family. (The power the family can exercise is another major structure defined in structural family theory.) The clue that one's conformity is merely superficial comes from behavior when one is in a situation where incongruent moral behavior does not involve the risk of rejection and isolation. However, although family enmeshment works against

achieving conformity, family cohesion is apparently necessary for its development. Without this, it would not be safe enough to define one's own security in the family group context and to sacrifice personal whim or wish for the standards of the group.

Developing Conscientiousness

Loevinger and other theorists, however, consider conformist morality less developed than an internalized morality. Some ideas of Murray Bowen's (1974; 1978) help clarify what seems necessary for further (conscientious) development. Bowen (1974) has stated that to differentiate oneself from one's family--to define boundaries between self and other, to escape or avoid enmeshment, one must functionally separate intellectual and emotional processes in oneself. When this is not done, one more easily succumbs to pressures from others to think and act in certain ways; emotional needs thus sabotage one's intelligence. The greater the anxiety or emotional need under which a person is operating, the greater will be the risk of this fusion of thinking and feeling. An upset individual's needs for togetherness are likely to outweigh needs for autonomy.

Since Loevinger's conscientious stage requires that the individual develop personal standards and values, a certain measure of freedom from pressures to think like the rest of the family is necessary. If emotional bonding to the family to be retained, then some differentiation of intelligence and emotion is necessary for moral growth. The more undifferentiated a person is, the more apt he or she is to get stuck in a family system which might preclude this growth and which a more differentiated person may be able to manage. One thinks of scriptures the world over which proclaim that one must be willing to leave the security of family togetherness to have the freedom to follow conscience.

Just as not all apparent conformity is real, so also an apparent moral autonomy may be pseudo-conscientiousness. Under pressure, individual family members react in different ways. An individual with intense emotional fusion with the family may need an emotional cutoff. One common such reaction is rebellion against all that the family stands for; one may also become an apparent loner, or may cast his or her lot with another enmeshed group. What may appear to be an autonomous choice of values and standards may thus be simple reaction. The concept of pseudoself is useful here; pseudoself appears to be a solidly developed self, but is negotiable. It will be easily changed under pressure, or when needs fostered by enmeshment are better served by change.

Other Relevant Concepts

Bowen's ideas of multigenerational transmission and societal transmission are useful in understanding moral socialization in the family. People tend to marry others about as differentiated as they themselves are, and will project

their own degree of undifferentiation on some of the children. Although some children manage to differentiate more than their parents, some regression also appears to occur. Over time, some segments of a family show a considerably lower level of differentiation than the original parental unit. Many personal and societal experiences affect the course of any given individual. However, the more differentiated the parents, the greater the likelihood of a healthy family in which members may differentiate and establish autonomous personhood.

Conclusions

1) Undifferentiated parents and enmeshed families are likely to produce a pseudo-conformity in many of the children which is simply a masked fear of the punishment of isolation and/or rejection.

2) Children who emotionally cut off the family may manifest an apparent moral maturity which is really rebellious reaction against family norms.

3) A reasonable amount of family cohesion, without strong enmeshment, is necessary for development of the trust which underlies moral conformity.

4) To genuinely move beyond conformity, an individual must differentiate intellectual and emotional functioning. This is necessary to develop personal standards without sabotage of the process by emotional needs. Family cohesion seems less important for this growth.

5) High flexibility of family boundaries may make less differentiation necessary for this development than would be required with rigid boundaries.

These ideas translate easily into research hypotheses. Relationships between these processes and other social science issues with moral implications--such as the tragedy of the commons, the uninvolved bystander, and locus of control--would also be interesting to explore. The first two of these ideas are concerned with extension of self boundaries from a narrowly defined family to a larger community--a process difficult in an enmeshed family. Perceived locus of control is a power concept related to the likelihood of one's behavior being self-determined.

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